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ABSTRACT

Since 1989, Channel One has broadcast a 10-minute newscast with two minutes of commercials. In exchange for receiving the Channel One broadcast, schools promise that 90% of the students will watch Channel One for 92% of the time; that each program must be watched in its entirety; that a show cannot be interrupted; and that teachers cannot turn the program off. The MTV-like commercials are beamed into 40% of America's classrooms, selling such products as Sega video games and Snicker's candy bars. This study examines the ways that students responded to these "required" commercials. This study focused on four main questions: (1) How well do students know these commercials? (2) How do students think about these commercials? (3) How do students evaluate these ads? and (4) How do these commercials affect students' behavior? Over a 2-year period (1993-1995), approximately 200 rural Missouri children were interviewed and the effects of mirroring, blurring, and replaying are discussed. One main reason students know these commercials so well is because they often parrot ads back or "mirror" commercials, usually word-for-word. When evaluating commercials and their own thinking about them, students often confused (or blurred) brand names with the action associated with them; in addition, real commercials were confused with "public service announcements." Replaying commercials was the most common way that ads affected children's behavior. Replays of commercials can also appear in objects that students complete in art class. Overall, the way that students watched the commercials indicated that the image supersedes both the word and the object; students need to know that the layers of imagery in commercials are just representations of reality. (AEF)

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Mirroring, Blurring, and Replaying: How Students Respond to TV Commercials

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INTRODUCTION

"What's advertised on Channel One?" I asked a group of five ninth-graders sitting around the table with me.

"Cinnaburst," replied Eric. "You know--that gum with those little red dots and--"

"No," injected Lisa, "those are *flavor crystals*."

Eric paused, muttered, "Oh yeah, flavor crystals...." He then quickly continued describing the other ads he'd seen on Channel One television, which beams a brief news program and two minutes of commercials to millions of students every day.

When Lisa corrected her classmate with the commercial's exact wording, the other students nodded in agreement. In their world, nothing strange had occurred; all was humdrum normal. These students live in the world of Channel One television--a world which requires them to watch two minutes of commercials each school day--for M&M's, Snickers, Skittles, Gatorade, Nike shoes, Donkey Kong video games, Dorritos chips, and other products.

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WHAT IS CHANNEL ONE?

Since 1989, Channel One, recently sold by Whittle Communications to K-III Communications, has broadcast a ten-minute newscast with two minutes of commercials. In exchange for receiving the Channel One broadcast, schools promise that 90% of the students will watch Channel One for 92% of the time; that each program must be watched in its entirety; that a show cannot be interrupted, and that teachers cannot turn the program off. Schools must submit attendance records to this corporation to verify their end of the deal. Also, schools receive approximately $50,000 worth of installed electronic hardware, such as a color television set for each classroom, a satellite dish (only capable of picking up Channel One's signal), and VCRs. Schools can use the hardware for projects in addition to Channel One, but must return the equipment if they cease to require students to view Channel One.

Channel One is now broadcast to over 12,000 schools in 48 states, with many more on the waiting list (Cramer 1993). About eight million students (over one-third of America's teens) are now watching Channel One--more than any other television program, except the Super Bowl (Goodman 1991). These MTV-like commercials are beamed into 40 percent of America's classrooms, selling such products as Sega video games and Snicker's candy bars. Channel One now reaps over $100 million dollars annually.

Most of us know, of course, that TV commercials are finely

crafted constructions of reality, based upon multiple layers of abstractions--that is, selections and omissions made by marketers, film editors, directors, and numerous other players in a free market economy. Channel One's commercials, I believe, represent the most stellar examples of how many media professionals make painstaking selections in order to penetrate their well-defined target audience of school children. Most observers agree that Channel One's production techniques resemble those of MTV or Music Television: bursts of images, slow-motion and soft-focus video images, rapid camera cuts, and background rock music (e.g., Carmody 1989; Rudinow 1990; "Homeroom Sweepstakes" 1992). As loaded, fast-paced, glitzy, and honed as these commercials are, what I want to focus on is how students respond to them.

THE STUDY

Throughout a two-year period (1993-1995), I interviewed approximately 200 rural Missouri kids--mainly in small focus groups and sometimes one-on-one. Sometimes we talked while we watched tapes of Channel One commercials together. I have concluded that these commercials penetrate deeply into students' language, thinking, and behavior.

In one year, Channel One students can watch 700 commercials (Honig 1990), viewing the same one hundreds of times, such Nike's "Be Like Mike" ad, with Michael Jordan. In this study, I set

about to describe all the possible ways that students responded to these "required" ads. Of course, patterns emerged from the data (40 hours of taped focus groups; 400 pages of transcripts and notes) which I would like to explore in this paper. I will focus only on three main questions: 1) How well do students know these commercials? 2) How do students think about these commercials? 3) How do students evaluate these ads? and 4) How do these commercials affect students' behavior? (Because I want to use my time today only to discuss results, I'll give you some handouts about the theory and research background for this study, its methods, protocol questions, and results.)

1. How Well Do Students Know These TV Commercials?

The answer is extraordinarily well. Kids consistently retained commercials' content and structure--plots, actors, actions, graphics, background music, and even small details of a product's packaging. Kids demonstrated intimate knowledge of ads'minute details. For example, months after a Little Caesar's pizza commercial had stopped airing, students recalled a brief scene of an elderly couple on a plane. They reported that the plane's seats were "red with little blue squares that have arrows sticking out of them."

Listen to the words of Paul, a ninth-grader, who described how Gatorade is packaged (a drink heavily advertised on Channel One:

They've also got two-gallong jugs and those are different from the bottles. Because on the two-gallon jugs, some of the print is of a different color. On the bottles, it can be a fruit punch flavor, but the label will be red and the print white. But on the two-gallon jugs, sometimes the letters might correspond to the flavor, and the background will be a different color.

If such commercials strike deep, they can also strike fast. One day on Channel One I watched a commercial which featured the professional athlete, David Robinson. Students told me that this commercial was brand new--they'd never seen it before.

That same day, students told me that this commercial had "three parts," which they reported in the correct sequence: first, Robinson goes to college and earns his Master's degree; second, Robinson becomes a naval officer, and third, he goes to the Olympics--twice--before becoming a professional ball player. Even though these students and I began that morning on the same level field (or so I thought), I could recall none of these things, not even immediately after watching it.

One main reason that students know these commercials so well is because they often parrot ads back or "mirror" commercials, usually word-for-word. Students did very little creating of their <u>own</u> mental maps or mental representations of these commercials. Only a handful of the 200 students I talked to had engaged in even moderate personal reflection and critical evaluation of

commercials. Rather, most of the time, students' internal representations of commercials seemed amazingly identical to what they had watched on the TV screen high above them.

Mirrcring. Students' internal maps of commercials mirrored the actual commercials in amazing detail. Like Lisa and Eric quoted at the beginning of this paper, students often used the exact wording of commercials, in a variety of contexts. In small groups, whenever a student brought up a different commercial for discussion, inevitably, other students would repeat, word-for-word, specific lines from that commercial. If one student said, "That reminds me of the Little Caesar's commercial," I could count on half of the group piping up with "pizza-pizza." When I listened to the tapes, the microphones even picked up students whispering such lines to themselves or to their neighbor.

One more example. When I asked one boy what a Gatorade commercial was about, he immediately replied, imitating someone else's voice: "And the best part is, you get to go there and watch me!" The "me" this student referred to is actually "Chuckie V.," the star of the commercial. This student not only used the commercial's exact words, but he also adopted the character's voice and even his point of view--instantaneously and with no explanation.

2. How Do Students Think About These Commercials?

When one group of students discussed an acne medicine they had just seen on a commercial, they referred to the product by

its name, "Clearasil." Minutes later, one student substituted the phrase, "washing your face" for the word, "Clearasil." Neither the speaker, nor any of the other students noticed that the advertised ointment somehow became the same thing as cleanliness.

Blurring. Here, the brand name was blurred or confused with the desribable action associated with it. It's little wonder, then, that students buy the products they see advertised. Which they do. Many of the products promoted on Channel One are available right there in the school. This and other types of blurring occurred most often when students were evaluating commerical.

Let me describe another type of blurring. When evaluating commercials and their own thinking about them, students often confused (or blurred) real commercials with "public service announcements"--those segments which advocate some cause for the public good, such as the wearing of seat belts. However, this confusion is not the students' fault.

That is, Pepsi's series of "It's Like This" commercials <u>do indeed</u> look very much like public service announcements. Pretending to be documentaries, in which "kids talk about their problems," these Pepsi ads insert several close-up shots of red, white, and blue Pepsi cans between black and white and muted color shots of kids talking directly into the camera. Since Channel One also airs public service ads, this "blurring" seems more than coincidental.

In one day, I talked to 29 students about this ad. Only

twelve thought it was a commercial. The other 17 students defined it as purely news or a combination of news and advertising, while seven could not decide. Most students insisted that "real kids like us" appeared in the ad, because, as one girl emphasized, "it just feels real!" Indeed, when my student teacher saw this ad for the first few times, even she didn't know if it was a commercial or a news item--and this person is a very bright, 50 year-old former editor!

Nearly all of the students I talked with felt that no matter how this commercial was defined--as a "regular" ad or as a public service announcement--Pepsi is really more concerned with "doing good" than it is with selling soft drinks, because its characters talk about their personal problems and not directly about the product. One ninth-grader, though, tried to sort this blurry mess all out for us when he pronounced thoughtfully, "It's not really a commercial--it's just a commercial sponsored by Pepsi."

Students who blur real commercials with public service announcements have a mental map which does not accurately reflect its territory, its reality--what general semanticists call a "semantic abberation." These Pepsi ads are selling Pepsi far more than they are promoting the public good, as so many students so fervently believed. (But given this environment and the purposeful ways these commercials are constructed, students certainly cannot be blamed for confusing them with other types.)

3. How Do Students Evaluate These Commercials?

The huge majority of students did an extremely poor job of effectively evaluating commercials and products. They were thinking, but they evaluted in very unproductive ways. Students' thinking seldom got beyond two options (good/bad; it's got to be either Nike or Reebok, etc.), or they would describe very obvious and intended inconsistencies within single commercials, hardly ever making generalizations about groups of certain types of commercials. The only type of unproductive evaluation I want to mention in a little detail is that which I call "embracing of commercials"--a kind of blind love and acceptance of ads.

Listen to the words of Debbie, a ninth-grader, who explains why she thinks star athletes such as Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal make the television commercials that she watches at school on Channel One:

> *I think it's stupid. I don't know why athletes do that--pay all that money for all them ignorant commercials for themselves. Guess it makes everyone like 'em more and like their team more. Doesn't Emmitt Smith have a bunch of commercials that's makin' everybody like his team better? I mean, if you're gonna play, then play!*

After I heard Debbie's response, I decided to ask each group that day the same question I had asked her: "Why do professional athletes make commercials?" The next group that morning brainstormed all the reasons they could think of. Their list

appears below, in the same order that students mentioned them.

- Because it motivates them to play better.
- Becuase it's a reward for doing excellent work.
- Because it helps their team.
- Because it elevates their status and reputation among their peers.
- Because athletes are sponsored by different companies.

After talking with Debbie and other students, I realized that they often did not consider commercials to be messages aimed at selling something. Instead, they viewed Nike commercials solely as advertisements <u>for</u> the athletes--perks which <u>they</u> pay for themselves, to bolster their own egos and their team's reputation. Scant few kids told me that athletes made commercials in order to sell something for someone else, or to earn money for themselves. Instead of seeing the athletes as endorsing products, many kids saw it as the products endorsing the athletes--a flip-flop from the way that most of us would define testimonial advertising.

<u>4. How Do These Commercials Affect Students' Behavior?</u>

Replaying commercials was the most common way that commercials affected kids' behavior (affected consumer behavior but won't talk about that today; suffice it to say they bought the products, often for sale right there in the school!) Replay behaviors include any type of actions initiated by kids which

repeat or reconstruct a commercial (or parts of an ad) in some way. Replays prompt or evoke within us all or parts of the original ad's message. Kids create replays in four main ways: 1) they verbally imitate ads; 2) they physically act out commercials; 3) they "re-present" ads inside their minds when they think about and even dream about commercials, and 4) they can reconstruct ads in another physical medium, such as painting or sculpture. Images, music, language, objects, and nonverbal communication--together or separately--can be used to create replays of commercials.

Television commercials are replayed countless times when students spontaneously sing the catchy jingles, mimic the voices, and physically act out their favorite scenes. Here are some examples. Commercials starring Shaquille O'Neal replay whenever someone like Jason Matthews signs a yearbook as "Shaq Matthews." When I asked Alex, a ninth-grader, to evaluate a shampoo commercial which contained the line, "Gimme a break," he sang these same words, but to a tune that advertises another product, Kit Kat candy bars.

Replays can even involve hundreds of people doing the same thing, physically acting out the same scenario from an ad. Many students reported that, at an October football game between their school and a neighboring small town, the bleachers full of home-team students erupted and chanted in unison, "Got-to-be, got-to-be--Dom-in-os!" This huge group even inserted, at just the right time, the jingle's punch line, "Crunchy thin crust."

This exact scenario occurs on a Domino's Pizza commercial which airs on Channel One and network television: a football game crowd chants the same line to an old rock song, which goes, "We will, we will--rock you." With people chanting, clapping, and stomping to the beat, even accompanied by the drummer from the school band, this "rerun" literally becomes another actual, mass sporting event. The large number of participants in this rerun are viscerally and intensely engaged with all the elements of the original ad's message. This message, of course, is also replayed to everyone else within earshot, including those who did not choose to participate. But the winner of this spontaneous reenactment, is, of course, Domino's Pizza Corporation.

Replays of commercials can even appear in physical art objects that students complete in art class. When one art teacher provided students with empty Pringles Potato Chip cans to fashion into three-dimensional self-portraits, Brady, a ninth-grader, created a face that looked exactly like the mustachioed cartoon character portrayed on the Pringles can, which, of course, resembled Brady in no way. Even with small details, Brady adhered to the commercial image: Brady's eyes are green, but he chose to make the Pringle character's eyes black, exactly like they appear on the can.

What's more, this Pringle's character that Brady replicated holds a tray with--you guessed it--an ever-so-tiny can of Pringles Chips on it. Brady's mental map of even himself turned out to be a three-dimensional replay of the product in the

Pringles ad, which, of course, airs on Channel One. Brady's response is more ironic when you consider that his teacher made this assignment in the first place, because, she said, their finished art pieces usually elicited more of the student's own personality, as opposed to drawing themselves while looking into a mirror.

Replays of commercials can occur in even more subtle ways. Several students described dreams they had about commercials. One girl, who dreamed about a McDonald's commercial, carefully sorted out the discrepancies between her dream and the "reality" of the commercial. A Big Mac, however, starred in both. Laura, a ninth-grader, told me about how one day, she and two friends watched a commercial for Glints hair coloring. They went out and bought it and tried it on their own hair the same day.

That night, Laura dreamed of the same commercial, which went like this. She and her friends had been hired to make the same shampoo commercial. They sat on a couch and held up the bottle, which is very similar to what happens in the actual commercial. In all the dreams I heard about, the product stars (or at least shares equal billing) with the dreamer.

In all of these types of replay phenomena, what is most important, what is retrieved automatically, is information linked to a product--not personal thoughts, not academic principles, not cultural concepts, not even functional information--just details which reinforce, again and again, commercials and their products.

CONCLUSION

Across America, a common, required text has emerged in schools. It is read by more students, more often, than *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, is the television commercial. I have reviewed here only three types of responses to such commercials: mirroring, replaying, and blurring--none of which constitute very effective critical thinking about commercials. Of course, kids could better critically evaluate these ads if they acknowledged that TV commercials were constructions of reality--messages created by someone else, apart from the commercial itself. However, this was hardly ever the case.

When I asked students, "From whose point of view is this commercial told--who is telling this story?" Ron replied that "it's not a story." Ron and most of the other students I talked with did not define commercials as a yarn made up by people. Students very seldom mentioned a director or editor who created these messages. They rarely demonstrated any knowledge that human beings were "standing outside" the text and calling the shots. At very best, students tend to view commercials as "second-order abstractions"--as only one level removed from reality, as if some vague force--perhaps an automated camera mounted on some anonymous, roving truck--directly recorded whatever it happened to scan.

Indeed, regardless of whether we discussed a commercial we were currently viewing, or talking about others, the large

majority of students reported that a commercial's point of view is expressed only by the characters who appear in it most frequently. After all, if nobody outside the message created it, then it makes sense that the point of view can come only from the inside--from the people who appear in the ad. All of these mental maps, of course, help students implicitly trust commercials and buy the products they sell. (And students do buy these products, many of which are available right in the school in which they watch the commercials.)

I ended each interview with students by asking, "Is there anything else about commercials that we haven't talked about?" What do you think most groups said? "Yes!" they usually enthused, "We need new commercials!" Showing people many commercials, every day for nine months, repeating certain ads endlessly, induces in them a need for new commercials--a desire for more. In 1995, simple operant conditioning is very much alive and well.

Lest you think otherwise, let me say that students clearly love and enjoy watching TV commercials in school. Nearly every small group became animated and excited by talking about commercials. It should be clear to general semanticists that Channel One commercials employ classic propaganda techniques, such as repetition (ad nauseam), testimonials (sports stars jump everywhere), transfers of one quality to another, and painstaking imagery. Such techniques, of course, work best in "closed" environments, where outside stimuli cannot interfere with the intended messages--exactly what advertisers have in classrooms.

But advertisers don not call this propaganda. Instead, they cloak it in phrases like, "brand and product loyalties through classroom-centered, peer-powered lifestyle patterning."

Overall, how these students watch TV commercials tells me that the image supersedes both the word and the thing. In the past, if General Semanticists have considered the Aristotelian view of language as a kind of invisible wall which prevents us from knowing first-order reality in concrete and sane ways, then images constitute additional barriers--additional symbolic layers or blankets imposed between people and their territory.

And these layers of imagery differ from the language barrier because they look so much like the reality we strive to reach. Therefore, our students must know that, just as the word is not the thing, nor is the image (Fox 1994). Our students need to know that these layers of imagery are just other representations of reality--however authentic they may appear. And finally, what students must know more than anything else is that these representations are not of their own making.

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